

Stacey Allan, "Role Refusal: On Louise Lawler's Birdcalls," **Afterall**, #20, Spring 2009, pp. 108-113

# Afterall

VITO ACCONCI  
CARL ANDRE  
RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER  
JOHN BALDESSARI  
ROBERT BARRY  
JOSEPH BEUYS  
DANIEL BUREN  
SANDRO CHIA  
FRANCESCO CLEMENTE  
ENZO CUCCHI  
GILBERT and GEORGE  
DAN GRAHAM  
HANS HAACKE  
NEIL JENNEY  
DONALD JUDD  
ANSELM KIEFER  
JOSEPH KOSUTH  
SOL LEWITT  
RICHARD LONG  
GORDON MATTA-CLARK  
MARIO MERZ  
SIGMAR POLKE  
GERHARD RICHTER  
ED RUSCHA  
JULIAN SCHNABEL  
CY TWOMBLY  
ANDY WARHOL  
LAWRENCE WEINER

BIRDCALLS BY LOUISE LAWLER  
RECORDED AND MIXED BY TERRY WILSON

Louise Lawler,  
*Birdcalls*, 1972/81,  
audio installation,  
dimensions variable.  
Courtesy the artist  
and Metro Pictures,  
New York

**Role Refusal:  
On Louise Lawler's *Birdcalls*  
— Stacey Allan**

The towering list of names is impressive: Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Richard Artschwager, John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Gilbert & George, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Neil Jenney, Donald Judd, Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, Gordon Matta-Clark, Mario Merz, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Ed Ruscha, Julian Schnabel, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol, Lawrence Weiner. Stacked one on top of the other, the appearance of these artists' names might typically signal the inclusion of their works in a group exhibition, but here they serve as part of an audio-and-text installation by an artist who literally buries her name under the more recognisable names of her contemporaries. At the very bottom of the heap, a modest line identifies the work: 'Birdcalls by Louise Lawler'. Perhaps only after reading this acknowledgement is one able to connect the ambient audio track and its incongruous cries with the names on the wall. The sounds are made by Lawler, who strains her voice to sing the names of twenty-eight celebrated male artists as though they were the songs of twenty-eight unique species of bird. She calls the first, last or full name of each artist as indicated by the part of the name that is printed in red or green, each name given its own specifically nuanced call: 'Acconci' is sung in a shrill staccato ('acconCHEE!!'); 'Gilbert & George' takes a low-pitched chatter ('Giberengeorge, Georgengilber! Giberengeorge!'); and 'Artschwager' has a manic squawk ('aa-arrRRRT-SCHWAGERRRR!!!'). Like the artists themselves, each name as performed by Lawler has its own imitable style.<sup>1</sup>

*Birdcalls* (1972/81), an early gem of an audio work in Lawler's largely photographic oeuvre, was first conceived in the early 1970s as a joke between the artist and her friend Martha Kite. The two women were assisting artists with the installation of a project along the Hudson River piers and, by Lawler's account, 'The women involved were doing tons of work, but the work being shown was only by male artists.'<sup>2</sup> While walking home from the piers late at night, Lawler and Kite — who called themselves the 'due chanteusies' — would make loud noises and act crazy in order to ward off any would-be offenders. After spontaneously warbling the name of the exhibition's organiser, Willoughby Sharp ('Willoughby! Willoughby!') as a bird, Lawler decided to develop a longer list of male artists' names from which to create her calls. She remembers *Birdcalls* as an instinctively antagonistic response to the name recognition enjoyed by her male contemporaries but afforded to very few women artists of the time. The names she chose to include when she recorded the piece in 1981 weren't those of distant masters such as Rembrandt, Picasso or even Pollock; they were her contemporaries, the male artists who dominated the market at that time. Though some stars have faded (notably those of Transavanguardia painters including Chia and Cucchi) the alphabetised list still reads as a roll call of blue-chip contemporary masters, a monolith as massive and eternal as the canon itself. But what the addition of Lawler's name and voice continues to make obvious is the homogenised state of this canon and, specifically, the frustrated efforts of women to join its ranks.

Many have written on the anti-authorial nature of Lawler's practice, which, particularly in its earlier years and in works contemporaneous with *Birdcalls*, found her acting in 'secondary' roles that were atypical for an artist but critical of the reception of an artist's works. Andrea Fraser, in a 1985 essay titled 'In and Out of Place', persuasively positioned Lawler as a virtually anonymous figure within her own production.<sup>3</sup> Though recent retrospectives have rendered her signature more visible than before, what one sees first in Lawler's works, both then and now, are works by other artists. For her first solo exhibition at Metro Pictures in 1982 she

1 A digital audio file of the work can be found at [http://www.ubu.com/sound/tellus\\_5-6.html](http://www.ubu.com/sound/tellus_5-6.html) (last accessed on 26 November 2008).

2 Douglas Crimp, 'Prominence Given, Authority Taken', *Grey Room* 4, Summer 2001, p.80.

3 Andrea Fraser, 'In and Out of Place', *Art in America*, June 1985, p.123. This was both the first monographic essay published on Lawler in a major art magazine and the first critical essay by Fraser, an artist and critic who was then enrolled in the Whitney Independent Study Program.

exhibited a series of 'arrangements' of existing works by other gallery artists including Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and Allan McCollum — these were to be sold for the combined price of the individual works plus a ten-percent 'consultant's fee' for Lawler. Later photographs of blue-chip works in corporate and private collections, such as *Arranged by Donald Marron, Susan Brundage, Cheryl Bishop at Paine Webber* (1982) and *Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, New York* (1984), further acknowledged the secondary players by naming them directly. As Fraser writes, 'By abdicating this privileged place of artistic identity, Lawler manages to escape institutional definitions of artistic activity as an autonomous aesthetic exploration.'<sup>4</sup>

In Lawler's symbolic reluctance to accept the starring role, there is an implicit challenge to the institution of authorship, the glorification of the individual artist evidenced by art history's emphasis on proper names, biography, authenticity — conventions that locate the value of a work in the name of its creator. In an often cited 2001 interview with Douglas Crimp, Lawler explained, 'This question of name recognition relates to my feelings about interviews, to the credibility that is given to a statement because of who is speaking'; anecdotally, she recalled, 'Along the same lines, I fantasised about being interviewed by Dick Cavett, but realising that no one would care about what I thought, I planned to write a script and ask Marcello Mastroianni to play me.'<sup>5</sup> To summarise the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who wrote extensively on the subject of artistic positioning, having a recognised name is the only way to have a legitimate voice as a producer, to actually be an artist who can occupy a position within the field and enter the discourse.<sup>6</sup> The question then becomes one of how certain names (Acconci, Andre, Artschwager, et al. — the Mastroiannis of their field) become more prestigious than others, and why their voices have more authority.

Around the time that Lawler first conceived *Birdcalls*, art historian Linda Nochlin's famous polemic 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971) appeared in *Art News*. In it, she contested metaphysical

assumptions about natural-born artistic greatness, long assessed on the basis of conformity to a male-oriented professional and art-historical ideology. The great artists have always been male, and history has determined that their masterworks set the standards by which new works are judged. The notion of 'genius', then, was a constructed myth, one that had long allowed the absence of women and other minorities from the art-historical canon to be falsely attributed to a lack of exceptional individuals rather than a surplus of social and institutional disadvantages. 'The fault, dear brothers, lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education....'<sup>7</sup> As Nochlin so eloquently and convincingly argued, the language of 'Greatness' was crafted by and for men.

So, to use a colloquialism that only serves to underline the dilemma of agency described above: what's a girl to do? Here it might be useful to situate the anti-authorial motivation of Louise Lawler as part of a larger 1970s postmodern, countercultural and feminist push to destroy heroic models. In an essay titled 'New Wave Rock and the Feminine' (1981), artist and critic Dan Graham ('*daagram!*') examined the gender divide within popular music and seemed to pose a question similar to Nochlin's: why have there been no women rock stars? Long gazed upon as the passive objects of paintings and sculptures, women were also the topics of most rock 'n' roll songs: Barbara Ann, Sherry, Michelle, (Help Me) Rhonda, Peggy Sue, Roxanne, (My) Sherona, Layla — these were some of popular music's *demoiselles*. Rock music was a man's game, the domain of teenage boys equipped with guitars and vivid sexual fantasies who spent hours in the garage mastering their instruments. Organised around a central male figure (the 'front man') the hierarchical structure of mainstream rock singled out one person as a star and relegated others — back-up vocalists, drummers, bassists, rhythm guitarists — to supporting roles. The names of rock stars, like those of the great artists, came to function as brand names for consumable products.<sup>8</sup>

4 *Ibid.*

5 D. Crimp, 'Prominence Given, Authority Taken', *op. cit.*, p.80.

6 Bourdieu writes, 'There are in fact very few other areas in which the glorification of "great individuals", unique creators irreducible to any condition or conditioning, is more common or uncontroversial — as one can see, for example, in the fact that most analysts uncritically accept the division of the corpus that is imposed on them by the names of authors... or the titles of works...' Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (ed. Randal Johnson), New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p.29. Some of the essays in this volume had been translated and published before, others were appearing in English for the first time.

7 Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *Art News*, January 1971, p.25.

Proficiency, power, aggressive sexuality — these, according to Graham, were the male-coded benchmarks of the rock star, and it is easy to see how social conventions would prohibit women from making their mark on these terms.<sup>8</sup> However, gender lines in music started to blur in the 1970s, as male rock stars (David Bowie, Bryan Ferry and others) began wearing eyeliner and adopting sexually ambiguous personas while aggressive, androgynous and newly liberated females began to take the stage wearing leather and assuming tough ‘macho’ posturing — for example, Joan Jett and her sexy-tough teenage rock band The Runaways. But as Graham points out, this position was based on male identification, a ‘simple inversion of the male “macho” principle’. Women on stage were identifying with, and invariably compared to, men. Female punk and new-wave performers such as Debbie Harry who emerged immediately thereafter, rejected this ‘macho’ rock ‘n’ roll posturing because it lacked irony, and many found it to be exploitive to women — they found (as it seems Lawler did as well) that self-parody, through the ironic embrace of female stereotypes, could be a more useful strategy than the simple imitation of men.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 1980s, Craig Owens wrote about mimicry as an effective feminist strategy within visual art. More than simple imitation, mimicry contained ‘a certain calculated duplicity’ that made it an ‘indispensable deconstructive tool’.<sup>11</sup> According to him, ‘The mimic appropriates official discourse ... but in such a way that its authority, its power to function as a model, is cast into doubt.’<sup>12</sup> Since women within Western art are often the objects but rarely the subjects of representation, the official discourse is a language spoken by men, which figures any speaking position as a masculine one. *Birdcalls* takes this concept of mimicry to its most literal and ridiculous extreme, with Lawler contorting her voice

to sing songs that clearly are not her own. She steals language, her warbled attempts referencing the female position as the object of male representation, the vessel for his voice; her pose was simply a way of ‘representing the representation’.<sup>13</sup> Lawler’s youthfully raucous and antagonistic performance strategy was actually not so far from strategies of parody and mimesis used around that time by the women of punk and post-punk who dressed as ‘the vamp, the tart, the slut, the waif, the sadistic maîtresse, the victim-in-bondage’, to mock their own objectification.<sup>14</sup> Take for instance ‘Oh Bondage! Up Yours!’, a 1977 song by X-Ray Spex in which singer Poly Styrene declaims, in a pouty British purr that builds to a punk screech: ‘Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think ... Oh bondage! Up yours!’ She shrieks:

***Bind me tie me chain me to the wall  
I wanna be a slave to you all  
Oh bondage! Up yours!  
Oh bondage! No more!***<sup>15</sup>

Maybe it is useful to think of *Birdcalls* as a type of vocal bondage assumed by Lawler, posing as the proverbial caged bird and vocalising her own oppression. Her position is really not so unlike that of the self-aware punk in collar and chains, a rowdy and playful use of self-parody to position herself against patriarchal systems of legitimation that require women to shackle themselves to male artists, to repeat their names, their styles, their careers.

Following on from Nochlin’s assertion that the great artists have always been male, identification with artistic fathers was long the only option — for both men and women alike — because art history honoured no ‘mothers’. The surest way for a female artist to have a legitimate voice was to simply take her place as the ‘daughter’ of a well-respected ‘father’ in a chosen family of influence, using

8 Graham quotes Devo, in an interview with *SoHo Weekly News*: ‘We figured we’d mimic the structure of those who get the greatest rewards out of the upside-down business and become a corporation.... We decided that what we hated about rock ‘n’ roll was STARS.... We watched Roxy Music, a band we liked, slowly become Bryan Ferry and Roxy Music. If you get a band that’s good, you bust it up and sell three times as many records.’ Dan Graham, ‘Punk as Propaganda’, *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965–1990* (ed. Brian Wallis), Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1993, p.96.

9 For example, Graham notes that endless hours of band practice in the garage (necessary for instrumental proficiency) was a socially acceptable form of teenage male-bonding. Since this was not true for teenage girls, proficiency would be coded as ‘male’. *Ibid.*, p.116.

10 *Ibid.*, p.119.

11 Craig Owens, ‘Posing’, in Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman and Jane Weinstock (eds.), *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992, p.201.

12 *Ibid.*

13 D. Graham, ‘The End of Liberalism’, *Rock My Religion*, *op. cit.*, p.77.

14 Dick Hebdige, ‘Hiding in the Light’, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, London: Comedia, 1988, p.27.

her voice to channel his. Artist and critic Mira Schor, evaluating the legitimising force of those associations twenty years later in an essay titled 'Patrilineage' (1991), suggested that Lawler's was the first generation for which identification with female forebears was even possible.<sup>16</sup> Schor goes on to critique the validation offered to women artists whose paternity can be clearly established through references to favoured artist 'mega-fathers' — Duchamp, Beuys, Warhol, *et al.* — and a particular group of male authors that she refers to as the 'six Bs': Baudelaire, Benjamin, Brecht, Beckett, Barthes and Baudrillard.<sup>17</sup> She cites, as an example, an *Artscribe* review of Lawler's photographic series 'An Arrangement of Pictures' in which the author references the appearance of works by Johns, Pollock and Miró, describes the series as 'Borgesian' (the seventh B?), and then relates Lawler's practice to that of Dan Graham and, 'of course, Duchamp'.<sup>18</sup> Though often more appropriate, she argues that references to the work of female artists are rarely used to legitimate the work of other women, and even less often used in discussions of male artists, despite the fact that the influence of female artists is often visually evidenced.<sup>19</sup>

But while critics and curators are often charged with building and perpetuating these shortsighted art-historical lineages, Schor raises the significantly less comfortable notion that women artists are also implicated. By consciously positioning themselves within a privileged lineage, by squawking, trilling, shrieking, chattering or otherwise referencing their chosen paternal influences, aren't they facilitating their acceptance into the established patriarchal system? Though Schor notes that a great deal of this self-identification with men can be attributed to education, and the fact that women artists are taught about a male art history with gender-biased values ('The fault, dear brothers...'), she also insists that there is a clear matrilineage; that it is rarely invoked suggests that it is not thought to be a professionally advantageous manoeuvre. She raises an interesting question towards the end of 'Patrilineage', though, when

she asks, 'Why link one's work and career to a weaker, less prestigious line?'<sup>20</sup> Though Schor refers to female 'mothers', this inquiry can easily be extended to an undervalued lineage of both male and female figures. Entering into a contemporary discussion of this 'weaker, less prestigious line' must therefore be a consideration of not only gender, but also of sexuality and race. At issue is not only the subjugation of the female voice, but the subjugation of all voices that do not align with the dominant canon.

Often, due to their lack of institutional recognition, it would seem that these other voices do not exist. But in print Schor reminds us:

*There are mothers. Matrilineage and sorority, though constantly reoccluded by patriarchy, exist now as systems of influence and ideology. [...] as a painter and a critic, I place myself in a matrilineage and a sisterhood: Frida Kahlo, Charlotte Salomon, Florine Stettheimer, Miriam Schapiro, Ida Applebroog, Elizabeth Murray, Ana Mendieta ... Griselda Pollock, Mary Kelly, Simone de Beauvoir — these are the artists and writers whose works have influenced, informed, and, perhaps most important, challenged my visual and cultural practice.*<sup>21</sup>

This name-listing strategy through which Schor directly and sincerely invokes her maternal line is an inversion of Lawler's paternal roll-call, a formal structure that finds interesting parallel in another feminist work of that time: Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–79). For this elaborate piece, which remains among the most significant for feminist art, Chicago crafted a triangular dinner table with 39 ceramic and embroidered place settings that honoured famous women (both real and fictional) throughout history. Quite literally, she reserved a place of honour for these women by inscribing their names by hand. By linking themselves to a 'weaker, less prestigious line', Schor and Chicago include and preserve names that may otherwise not find room at the table. More than just an expression of gratitude, it is an ethical

16 Schor writes: 'Artists ... who have come of age since 1970, belong to the first generation that can claim artistic matrilineage, in addition to the patrilineage which must be understood as a given in a patriarchal culture ... despite the historical, critical and creative practice of women artists, art historians and cultural critics, current canon formation is still based on male forebears, even when contemporary women artists — even contemporary feminist artists — are involved.' Mira Schor, 'Patrilineage', *Art Journal* 50, no.2, Summer 1991, p.58.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, p.59.

19 For example, Schor notes that Robert Morris's 'labial' pink felt sculpture *House of the Vetti* (1983) clearly recalls the earlier work of Hannah Wilke. In a review of Morris's work by Donald Kuspit, the obvious association with Wilke (or any similar women artists of the 1970s) was ignored. *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, p.61.

21 *Ibid.*, p.63.

Louise Lawler, (*Stevie Wonder*) *Living Room Corner, Arranged by Mr. & Mrs. Burton Tremaine Sr.*, New York City, 1984/1985, colour photograph, red type on white mat margin, 46.4 x 60.3cm. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

positioning that sees all artistic production as a collaboration with one's sustaining influences.<sup>22</sup> Lawler chooses to drown her voice in a very different sea of names to accomplish a similar end, satirically summoning the same prestigious male names that are routinely called forth by art critics and historians in exhibition reviews and catalogue essays, curators and gallerists in the rosters of group and survey exhibitions, and artists themselves in statements, interviews, studio visits, and lectures. By manipulating her own voice to project those names, she parodies the way in which the female voice often is drowned out through comparison to male forebears, being heard — if heard at all — as simply the voice of her master.

At the end of 'Patrilineage', Schor addresses possible corrective strategies for future canon formation. She proposes that the disruption of patrilineage 'is not a question of creating a Marceline Duchamp; it is exactly the opposite.'<sup>23</sup> By this, I believe that Schor was quite rightly proposing — and suspect Lawler would agree — that the goal should not be the exaltation of an elite group of female 'mother' figures, but a re-evaluation of the hierarchical ordering system that requires the 'eternal ritual killing and resurrection of a limited type of father'.<sup>24</sup> Like Joan Jett in James Dean's leather, Marceline Duchamp — even if she learned how to walk the walk and squawk the squawk — would inevitably be identified as a woman in a man's role.



22 Musically, this type of 'shout-out' is a practice that cultural scholar Dick Hebdige traces back to West African tradition by way of the reggae 'toast', which was simply a list of names or titles set to music. He writes that 'the namer pays tribute ... to the community from which (s)he has sprung and without which (s)he would be unable to survive. The speaker or singer's voice is drowned beneath the sea of names it summons up around itself.' Interestingly, West Africa is also considered by some scholars to be the ancient home of the Amazons, a tribe of warrior women in Greek mythology who lived and battled independently of men; memories of this fierce tribe were invoked by the all-female New Wave band The Slits, who posed bare-chested and caked in mud on the cover of their 1979 album *Cut*. Dick Hebdige, *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity, and Caribbean Music*, London: Comedia, 1987, p.4.

23 M. Schor, 'Patrilineage', *op. cit.*, p.63.

24 *Ibid.*



